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ABSTRACT

A study examined the reading strategies of a "reluctant reader," a bright and accomplished fifth grader whose achievements had not as yet included a love of reading or very good comprehension skills. Subject of the study, a female, was an excellent student at a private school where whole language, reading and writing groups, and individualized reading are stressed. A read-aloud, think-aloud protocol was used to determine which of the student's reading processes were serving her well and which were in need of development. Results indicated that her lack of involvement with the text and ignoring of grammatical clues led to her inability to fully comprehend the meaning of the text. Findings suggest, after some practice with the protocol, the student progressed toward increased confidence in her own meaning-making capabilities and took more pleasure in reading. (Contains 8 references.) (CR)

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Encouraging the Reluctant Reader: Using a Think-Aloud Protocol to Discover Strategies for Reading Success

ED 420 837

Introduction

In 1996, an estimated 20 percent of all American adults were illiterate, prompting President Clinton, during his campaign for re-election, to announce his goal of helping all third-graders to become independent readers by the year 2,000. The call for literacy is clear, but the methods to achieve this goal are still in need of study. Sparked by this mandate, and believing that solutions are best crafted in the concrete, I decided to take a closer look at the reading strategies of my own "reluctant" reader, a bright and accomplished fifth grader whose achievements had not as yet included either a love of reading or very good comprehension skills.

Annie is an excellent student at a private school where whole language, reading and writing groups, and individualized reading are stressed. Previously, she attended a more traditional elementary school where she learned to read phonetically, using the "letter people." Throughout her young life, Annie has been exposed to a literacy-rich environment at home and has participated in many "literacy events" at school, including Young Authors' workshops and "Book-it" projects. A fluid reader (as well as an excellent speller), she is able to sound out words to make "meaning" quite adeptly, although she lacks confidence in her own reading ability. Also, while she owns many books, most of which she has selected herself, she shows very little curiosity about what lies within them. She will rarely read a book that is not assigned to her in school, and if she does begin a book on her own, she often will not finish it. Reading is simply not something that Annie does for pleasure!

One of the primary ways of understanding reading processes is to ask readers--of any age or level of reading ability--to offer a verbal report of their thought processes as they read a text, either aloud or to themselves. Generally termed "think-aloud protocols," the first-hand data

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gathered from these reports over the years has been invaluable in understanding the reading process and targeting the kinds of skills that might be developed in order to turn non- or "reluctant" readers into ones who read with purpose, understanding, and genuine pleasure.

It was just such a think-aloud protocol that I undertook with my daughter Annie as I set out to explore the dimensions of her reading behavior. My hope was to determine what features of Annie's reading might be holding her back from developing a true enjoyment of the reading process and how these strategies might be encouraged and supported in the future to instill in her the pleasure in reading that would lead to a life-long reading habit.

Method

I chose a read-aloud, think-aloud protocol--combined with an awareness of Annie's miscues while reading (Goodman, 1996)--as my method for exploring the factors that could make the most difference in a young reader's transition from a "reluctant" into a life-long reader. The first step in the project was to take Annie to a large bookstore, where she was invited to select any book or magazine she would like to read for the verbal protocol, which had been explained to her but not yet demonstrated. On this last day of the Summer 1996 Olympics, which she had been avidly watching, she chose a paperback entitled *Shannon Miller: American Gymnast--From Girlhood Dreams to Olympic Glory*. Prominently situated in an "Olympics Athletes" display, this title is part of a "Going for the Gold" series aimed for elementary school students. Annie also selected a brand new bookmark depicting ballet slippers and a flute to go along with it, a choice reflecting her own recreational--and highly successful--pursuits. This gesture suggested to me an initial, albeit unconscious, attempt at establishing some identification with the gymnast whose story she was about to read, or perhaps a desire to connect to those areas where Annie is on more confident footing than she is with reading.

The next day, Annie and I talked informally about the nature of a think-aloud protocol. I modelled a reading for her, choosing a text with which I was unfamiliar (a biography of Mohammed Ali) and attempting to verbalize a gamut of reading strategies. She did some

practicing as well on a book grabbed at random from her bookshelf: *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*. After a self-conscious start filled with giggles and blushes (as she reported, "I want to read, but I can't stop smiling"), she was a willing reporter of cognitive and affective processes to the extent, I think, that a ten year old could be expected to be in touch with these thoughts and feelings. And even when she did not readily verbalize, there were ample clues that she was processing some ideas or feelings--some evidence of being under a high cognitive load (Ericsson & Simon, 1982)--that would signal whomever was in the room with her to inquire further. These cues often took the form of pauses, smiles, or miscues in reading a few words ahead.

On the third day, Annie was asked to talk aloud about why she selected *Shannon Miller: American Gymnast--From Girlhood Dreams to Olympic Glory* and to describe her initial pre-reading strategies, both in general and for this book specifically. This was followed by four days in which she was asked to read from her book for 10-12 minutes a day. She averaged approximately 20 think-aloud responses during each of these 10-12 minute segments, ranging from simple shrugs of "I wonder what that means" to elaborate recollections of experiences in her own life that mirrored the text. Twelve minutes--an average of seven or eight pages--was as long as she could continue productively on any one day. This became particularly apparent one day when, toward the end of a very rich session, she read a sentence with neither affect or reaction, a sign that it was time to stop. Upon resuming reading the next day, she began with that same sentence--not remembering it from the day before--and proceeded to comment elaborately upon it.

I was present with Annie during her first two think-aloud sessions, but removed myself from the interaction during the last two. I speculated that a change in the social context of her reading--a dimension that often goes unnoticed in think-aloud protocols (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995)--would provide some insight into how Annie's reading behavior might change in response to being in a more informal--less school-like and authority-laden--environment. Thus, the last two protocols were conducted with only Annie's seven year old sister--who was coached on eliciting responses--in the room with her. All of the sessions were audiotaped. The setting was a

naturalistic one; Annie read in her own bedroom, seated on the floor and surrounded by dolls, stuffed animals, and other usual clutter.

Analysis

One of my primary areas of interest was to determine which of Annie's reading processes were serving her well and which were in need of development to start her on the path toward a life-long commitment to reading. Using a variety of descriptions of a "skilled" reader--including those established by Langer (1993), Kucan (1993), Smith (1994), and most thoroughly by Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), I noted that, in fact, many of her reading strategies did mirror those employed by successful readers. For example, her pre-reading strategies certainly seemed to embody the characteristics of a good reader. Annie knew what she wanted to get from this text (Langer, 1993), that is, a clearer understanding of the Olympics, in which she was at the time engrossed, and greater familiarity with a person whom she admires: "I picked this book because I love Shannon Miller. She's a good gymnast, she's nice 'cause she was helping Kerri Strug up, and she always says "good job" to people."

Annie also displayed extensive knowledge about texts, genres, and publishing conventions (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). For instance, she reported that the first thing she was going to do upon opening her new book was look at the copyright date ("cause I always do that first; I don't know why"), and then ascertain other publishing information, such as the author (and thus the genre: "was this a biography or autobiography?") and the publisher. She then went on to read the dedication ("cause I just want to see somebody's name") and the Acknowledgements page, which she reported that she would have skipped had this not been a biography because of the likelihood of "a lot of boring stuff." Clearly, Annie knows herself as a reader who enjoys the personal touch, the true life stories of people to whom she can relate, filled with information in which she has an authentic interest (Smith, 1994).

From the reading protocol itself, other of Annie's reading strengths emerged as well. As a good reader, she was clearly building what Langer has termed an "envisionment"--an orienting

frame in which she worked hard to "relate information, round out and build [her] ideas, and make them cohere" (1993, p. 19). Moreover, a good reader needs to be flexible about this "envisionment" (what Pressley & Afflerbach call a "macrostructure" [1995, p. 39]), willing to make changes as new information presents itself. Annie demonstrated this flexibility soon after the project began. Her initial prediction before starting the book was that it was going to be about the 1996 Olympics (showing an interesting gap in her otherwise savvy approach toward publishing conventions, since the Olympics were still in progress). For a short while, she tried to hold onto this envisionment in the face of evidence to the contrary, misreading "gold" (which Miller won with her teammates in 1996) for "bronze," the actual word on the page, and reading about one of Miller's accomplishments in the present, rather than past, tense.

Soon, however, the real time frame became indisputable, as she read a specific reference to Barcelona and the "Olympic Games of 1992." Although she only paused over this sentence--not verbalizing her new awareness of this mis-prediction--her adjustment was clear as she then began to make verbal comparisons between this year's Games and those four years ago. First she re-adjusted her orientation by commenting "hmmm, I don't remember the 1992 Olympics. I just remember watching some Olympics, but not the Barcelona ones." And then she proceeded to capitalize, as any strong reader would, on what she does know, comparing various aspects of the two Olympics, such as scoring changes ("They use four numbers now, not just three") and changes in the Team's composition ("I guess that Betty [Okino] and Wendy [Bruce], it was their last Olympics that year, four years ago, but um Kim Zmeskal, I don't know, I guess she didn't make the Olympics team; maybe she was worse than everyone else").

Annie also spent a good bit of time elaborating the text through recall of prior knowledge, a characteristic that Kucan (1993) found evident in her study of male readers in the 6th grade who were developing reading proficiency. Many of Annie's verbal reports linked the textual information to her own world--particularly her external world of television and the media.[1] And so, the statement that "gymnasts can win medals in three categories" reminded her of Jeopardy; the "quest for Olympic medals" put her in mind of Quantum Leap; reading that the book was

published by Avon made her think of Avon ladies advertised on television by Jackie Joyner Kersey, and the line "Shannon proved you can be small and win big" prompted a comparison to McDonald's, "because you win big."

Annie also read the text quite efficiently and smoothly. In fifteen pages of text, she paused over or initially mispronounced only a handful of difficult words--including "boisterously, "podium," and "coveted" and "simultaneously." Moreover, she would often unwittingly insert small words into her reading to make the sentence flow more smoothly, as in this line of text: "[they] gave me time and cheerfully answered all (inserts of) my calls."

However, during the time that I was present for the reading protocol, Annie showed many signs of lacking a real investment in, or fully comprehending, what she read. For example, she would often ignore the grammatical clues within sentences, making her reading occasionally miss the mark in terms of inflection or appropriate meaning. Take, for example, this difficult sentence:

> Gymnasts, assigned to squads, or groups, enter a new round of competition as they make rotations to each apparatus (piece of gymnastics equipment), where they perform an operational routine.

Because she read these lines as if the explanatory parentheses and commas weren't there, the meaning remained a complete puzzle ("I don't get this"). In addition, although a more confident reader might have been critical of the way this confusing passage--and others similar to it--was written, it never occurred to Annie to question the authority of the text. In every instance of confusion, she would finally accept failure to comprehend as her own lacking.

Indeed, whether the text was clear or murky, Annie was often content to be confused--to "stop the act of meaning-making" (Langer, 1993, p. 19) when she met with difficulty, or to defer to my perceived greater authority. Frequent statements such as "I wonder what that means" " or "What is that?; I don't know" attest to this lack of drive toward comprehension while I was present. At times when I challenged her, she would attempt to make her own meaning, sometimes with success and sometimes not, but always, I think, with a diminished sense of her own abilities, as well as an awareness of performing in the face of my greater authority, both as mother and

examiner (Brodkey, 1992). Take, for instance, these examples of Annie's reading while I am present in the room:

> Text: Hundreds of television cameras captured the fifteen-year-old girl smiling and waving to the standing-room-only crowd.
> Annie: What is that?
> Researcher: What do you think it is?
> Annie: I don't know...people only standing because they're going like that (puts hand over heart as if to pledge allegiance to the flag)? I don't know. I'm hot.
> * * *
> Text: Shannon knew not to be too dazed by her outstanding performances.
> Annie: I don't know what "dazed" means.
> Researcher: What do you think it means?
> Annie: I don't know. Conceited? Like she really doesn't care? Like she does care, but she doesn't say (shouts) I WON!!!? (Giggles) I'm stupid.

These reactions are telling, I would suggest, in the way they show her inhibition at making meaning that might turn out to be wrong in front of the "teacher" and the feelings of discomfort and failure that can so easily become internalized and transferred to the reading process. It seemed that as long as I was present, Annie was acutely aware of her subjectivity as that of "daughter," "student, "even "reluctant reader."

Annie tried to hold on to these familiar subjectivities even after I removed myself from her protocols--leaving in my place her seven-year-old sister Katie--but had to quickly learn to rely on her own instincts and inferential abilities. These three successive exchanges indicate Annie's progression toward increased confidence in her own meaning-making capabilities:

> Text: Because the events happen simultaneously, spectators often feel that they're viewing a four-ring circus!
> Annie: I really wanted to know why they showed like one person when they should have been showing another person. I don't think that should be...how do they pick?
> Katie: How should I know?
> Annie: Well, maybe a little bit of everything? No, they show all the United States people, don't they? I guess in Romania they show all the Rumanian people.
> * * *
> Text: Finally, a tall, older gentleman calmly said to come with him. He directed them [Shannon's mother and sister] to the shoe department where, behind the counter, little Shannon was trying on a pair of men's big, black shoes!
> Annie: laughs...how cute!
> Text: Mrs. Miller said it's funny to look back on it.

Annie: laughs, I bet; it's funny.
Text: "And," she said, "it's ironic because to this day, Shannon has a shoe fetish."
Annie: laughs; I wonder what fetish means; do you know?
Katie: Beats moi.
Text: You can't take her into a mall without her looking at shoes.
Annie: laughs; I guess it means she's obsessed with shoes.
* * *
Text: Dr. Miller thought she'd be (short pause) exceedingly scared [about riding on a motorcycle].
Annie: I guess she wasn't.
Text: He sat her up on the gas tank and told her where to hold on.
Annie: laughs
Text: `I thought she'd probably get a death-grip on those handles,' he explained.
Annie: Maybe a death grip meant that she was holding on like really hard; like she might kill him.

Annie's new willingness to participate in the meaning-making process seems not only to increase her comprehension of what she was reading but her pleasure in reading it as well, as signalled by the many rich laughs that follow Annie's reading of individual lines and phrases, as opposed to the nervous giggle that punctuated much of her previous protocol.

Annie also called upon her background knowledge to a much greater extent when she read alone with Katie. Rather than limiting herself to relating the text to cues from her external world, she elaborated the text much more fully with incidents and analogies from their own mutually constructed past, perhaps in an attempt to draw Katie into the text more fully; to make meaning clearer for her (and ultimately for herself); and to form community. Take, for example, these passages, where Annie tries to draw a direct link between Shannon Miller and her own sister:

Text: Shannon was 4 months old when she moved with her family to Edmond, Oklahoma.
Annie: I didn't know that; that reminds me of you 'cause you were only 8 months old when we moved to Michigan.
* * *
Text: Claudia Miller and her 2 small daughters were in J.C. Penney's baby department at Shepherd Mall. Claudia saw her girls go around the corner of a table of baby clothes. When she looked up a minute or two later, she saw Tessa, but not Shannon.... Mrs. Miller looked all around and began asking people, "Have you seen a blond, curly-haired girl?" No one had.
Annie: It's like, it reminds me of when we were at J.C. Penney's and we couldn't find you.
* * *
Text: The couple who babysat for [Shannon] later confessed to a "game" Shannon liked to play. Larry would put Shannon on top of the refrigerator. She would jump off and he

would catch her.
Annie: That would hurt me if you were on the refrigerator and you jumped off.
* * *
Text: Little Shannon Lee Miller jumped off refrigerators, roofs, and trampolines.
A: Laughs. She seems really fearless. Just like you.

While Annie still seems to resist a direct engagement with the subject of the book--preferring to defer that honor to her younger sister--there is a much more positive spirit to the analogies made during this phase of the protocol. Compare, for example, this negative comparison made early on:

Text: Her ability to stay calm and confident makes her a good competitor.
Annie: (giggles). Not me, because in Waterloo [at a dance competition] I was not calm. [2]

Also in much greater evidence during these last two sessions is Annie's engagement with the text itself. In the earlier protocols, she resisted re-reading for increased clarity or comprehension, despite my encouragement to do so. Once she had a more genuine audience, however, Annie read much more selectively, slowing down or repeating reading what she judged to be important or of interest to her listener. She also seemed at times to repeat text in order to hold it in working memory longer, so that she and her reading companion could contemplate it. Clearly expecting more from her performance, she was also willing to read lines over and over to get the inflection just right. In addition, would often add dramatic flourishes for her appreciative listener--much to their mutual delight--as in these three-way exchanges among text, reader, and listener:

Text: Shannon was 4 1/2 when one of her toys ended up on the neighbor's roof (reads again with emphasis).
Annie: laughs; how did it end up there?
Katie: Maybe she threw it up and it landed there.
Annie: Maybe.
Text: John, the neighbor, lifted her high enough to crawl up and get the toy. Then...
Annie: laughs
Katie: That guy must be tall .
Annie: yeah!
Text: Getting off the roof seemed to be a problem. John said, `Jump, I'll catch you!'
Annie: laughs, gasps, oh my gosh--reads line again, "Jump, I'll catch you." laughs
Text: Dr. Miller remembers thinking, `She won't jump off trusting someone she barely knows to catch her.' But she did.
Annie: Hoho (a deep belly laugh here), She probably barely fell.
* * *

Text: Of all the toys or gifts Shannon received as a child she and her family best remember the trampoline Santa Claus brought in 1981....Claudia Miller realized their daughter really expected a trampoline.
Annie: long sigh: Boy, I want a trampoline.
Text: She knew they were expensive and could be dangerous.
Annie: That's right! That's why daddy won't let us get one.
Text: She says, 'As the time drew closer, we decided we were going to have one very disappointed kid on our hands if Shannon didn't get a trampoline.'
Annie: Ohh. That's like I wanted Addie [a doll].
Katie: Yeah, and I wanted Samantha [a doll].
Annie: And we got it! (laughter from both and long pause).

Once, Annie even completely misread the text, so great was her desire to engage her audience and build community. She read the lines "Shannon was independent even as a toddler. When she was eighteen months old, she gave her mother a real scare," but replaced "scar" for "scare." Instead of catching and correcting her mistake, she re-read the line again with even more flourish, ending by saying "oh my gosh" in a dramatic tone.

Discussion

Annie's verbal reports while reading *Shannon Miller: American Gymnast--From Girlhood Dreams to Olympic Glory* demonstrated that she is a reader whose reading strategies have much in common with those of expert readers of all ages. From her carefully described pre-reading behaviors to her ability to build and change her "envisionments" and relate to the text using prior knowledge, she seems to be on the brink of making a commitment to reading as a life-long habit.

But this commitment is threatened by her lack of real involvement in the world of the text, which showed itself in her lack of thorough comprehension, identification, and genuine enthusiasm for the reading task. However, all of these aspects of Annie's reading seemed to improve dramatically once she was placed in a context where she needed to rely on her own meaning-making capabilities more fully and thus had to accept the reality of her own authority as a reader. Moreover, the social context of reading with another youngster encouraged a reading that was more reciprocal, more exploratory, and more filled with a willingness to engage and negotiate meaning in every way, as the two children eagerly "shap[ed] the clay of the text"

(Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995, p.42). And it is here--at this critical intersection between reader and text--that much of a reader's comprehension activity will actually take place (Kucan, 1993).

The insights gathered from listening to Annie's verbal reports suggest several applications to our own classrooms, which may be filled with students like Annie--on the verge of making a commitment to reading, of seeing themselves as "readers" as part of their personal self-definition. Certainly, allowing students to choose their own texts is an important strategy for giving emerging readers a chance to build confidence and commitment by maximizing their interest and potential participation in the reading experience (Henry, 1995).

But the think-aloud procedure itself, with its enormous versatility, can also be an important tool into developing skilled and confident readers. I smile when I picture Annie's pride in being asked to do this project--in being invited to fully express her unique thoughts--being transferred onto a classroom of readers. Moreover, this research shows most dramatically that this interactive think-aloud approach should not be limited to teachers interacting with students. Most students simply cannot read as experts for the teacher. They can, however, read with confidence and enthusiasm for one another.

While many schools are in the practice of creating "reading buddies," where children of greater reading ability will read and listen to those with more emerging skills, I don't believe that this practice takes the interactive emphasis far enough, not does it consider how much the child with the greater ability has to gain from such pairings. Rather, I suggest that the emphasis should be placed on true interaction between readers at various grade and ability levels. Encouraging them to read, think about, and discuss texts with one another might help enormously, as it did in this case, to enhance reading comprehension, encourage an awareness of the reciprocal nature of making meaning, and simply to promote genuine enjoyment.

No one reading environment or strategy is going to work best for every reader in our classrooms or in our lives. At all levels, we must be aware of each of our students as the individuals they are and adjust our strategies accordingly. But in following this project, it was gratifying to see that Annie quickly read this book to its conclusion, often discussing passages

with Katie, who also began to read it. What's more, the two sisters engaged the book on a more physical level as well by acting out whole passages as pretend Olympics stars. This verbal think-aloud protocol will remain a key element in encouraging Annie's transition from reluctant to ready reader; I believe it has already made a difference!

NOTES

[1] However, Annie made only one attempt--unsuccessfully--at linking this reading experience with another. In her very first response, after reading that Shannon was from Oklahoma, she responded that "I'm thinking about that book I read that was set in Oklahoma...Children of the ...(snaps her fingers in an effort to remember the title)...I forget." [Dustbowl]

[2] Annie's resistance towards identifying with Shannon Miller herself--although as an accomplished dancer, the similarities between her and the gymnast certainly exist--coupled with negative comments scattered throughout the protocol (such as her speculation that Kim Zmeskal was "worse than everyone else") point to Annie's sense of her inadequacies as a reader.

[3] This seems to suggest that pointing out mistakes to readers (young and old) only spoils their enjoyment of and ability to engage with reading. Conversely, not pointing them out may allow the reader to function more independently, figuring out and adjusting meaning as she reads.

[4] This sort of information is often unavailable to the researchers, and points to the utility of parents using procedures such as this at home.

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